



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues

**Arab women's socio-economic gaps and
Jewish-Arab women's collaborations in Israel**

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Background:

Broadly speaking, because Arab and Jewish citizens tend to live in separate localities in Israel, speak different mother tongues and attend separate Hebrew and Arabic public school streams, it is possible and even common for Arab and Jewish women in Israel to lead full lives without a significant amount of meaningful interaction. While recent years have seen some important trends to the contrary – such as middle class Arab families moving into historically Jewish cities, greater integration of Arab women into the labor market, and significant enrollment of Arab women in higher education – separate social and professional spheres generally remain the norm. Only 40% of Arab women are employed in any form, and most of those work in or around their home community. While Israel's Arab society is culturally and religiously diverse, many Arab women are part of traditional communities where travel, study or employment outside their home village are still restricted to various degrees by social norms.

Over the last two decades, the concept of shared society has taken root in Israel's civil society organizations, many of which seek to ensure that Jewish and Arab citizens have equal access to Israel's social and economic opportunities and have full legitimacy and opportunity to participate in and influence Israel's public spheres. In parallel, the government of Israel has prioritized closing economic gaps between Arab and Jewish citizens and advancing economic development of Arab society.

Arab women figure prominently in both these trends:

1. **Employment integration:** Increasing Arab women's employment rate is recognized as a feasible opportunity to lift families out of poverty and to raise Arab society's contribution to Israel's economic growth.
2. **Social Change:** A rise in feminism in Arab society has women pursuing greater freedom and living with fewer constraints, at times collaborating with Jewish feminist leaders and organizations around common causes.
3. **Leadership:** Today there are Arab women government officials, academics, business executives, civil society leaders, scientists, activists and more in Israel. While they are still very few, they have become important figures in promoting equal opportunities, awareness and shared society. For example, Israel's EEOC Commissioner, Mariam Kabaha, is the highest-

ranking Arab woman in Israel's civil service. Having overcome the many barriers to empowerment and social participation that Arab women face (both as women from traditional communities and as members of the Arab minority) these women often take on leadership roles that involve advancing Israel's Arab society, shared society between Arabs and Jews, and women's status and equality. [Read a Task Force column about such Arab women trailblazers, here](#). Such leaders have inevitably forged collaborations and closer relationships with Jewish women and Jewish society in general in Israel.

Socio-Economic Gaps and Barriers

To appreciate the nature and significance of Jewish and Arab women's collaboration in Israel, it is important to put into context the socio-economic and social gaps that characterize their different starting points.

- **Poverty:** While poverty rates have decreased over the past decade, Israel's Arab citizens still have poverty rates between twice and three times that of the Jewish majority with 44.2% of Arab families and 62.5% of Arab children defined as poor by Israel's National Insurance Institute ("Bitu'ach Leumi") in 2018, compared to 13.4% of Jewish families and 21.2% of Jewish kids. Arab families, which in 2018 comprised 14.5% of families in Israel, represented 36.6% of poor families, versus 37.4% in 2017 and 39% in 2016 - a gradual drop that still leaves the poverty rate of Arab families at about triple their population representation. Arab towns and villages are also ranked lowest on Israel's socio-economic scale of municipalities (1 to 10) with most rated 1-3 and none above 5. These high poverty rates can be explained by some of the figures detailed below.
- **Geographic Periphery:** About 70% of Arab citizens live in the poorer peripheral regions of the country (57% of Arabs live in the Galilee and northern region and 13% in the Negev) and thus suffer from the general disadvantages of Israel's periphery, including limited job opportunities, low-level municipal services, inadequate or non-existent public transportation and low-grade, scarce commercial infrastructure.
- **Employment:** While almost 83% of Jewish women in Israel are employed, only 40% of Arab women work. This is a significant progress from the 23% employment rate 10 years ago, but is still among the lowest employment rates in the world. In addition, Arab women are over-represented in low-skilled, part-time, low-wage labor. 2017 data show that the average wages of Arab women are 41% less than the average wages of Jewish women, and 32% less than the average wages of Arab men.
- **Higher Education:** Arabs are 17% of all students in Israeli higher education institutions but comprise 28% of the relevant population group. Efforts to increase Arab access to higher education over the last decade have led to a significant rise in Arab enrollment in higher education, with women responsible for most of the increase. Today, 60% of all Arab students in Israel are women. The percentage of Arab women with an undergraduate degree from Israeli institutions has risen from 9.8% in the year 2000 to 23.7% in 2018, while the percentage of Arab men holding a bachelor's degree rose from 7.6% in 2000 to only 9% in 2018; 65% of Jewish women and 45% of Jewish men currently hold such degrees. According to a Ministry of Finance report from 2019, for Arab women there is a

very strong correlation between higher education and employment rates: Arab women with an elementary or high school education are employed at rates between 16% and 25%, while 58% of Arab women with a vocational degree and 73% of Arab women with an academic degree are employed.

- **Violence:** Violence and crime have become the topmost concerns of Arab society in recent years, which significant relevance to Arab women. In recent years, Arab women made up almost half of all women murdered in Israel in what are described as gender-related murders. In early 2019, the wave of violence against women led to unprecedented cooperation between Jewish and Arab women's groups, including a large demonstration in Tel Aviv and numerous locations around the country. [Read a Task Force column about this collaboration, here.](#)

These unique circumstances of Arab women, which result from various current and historical causes have manifested themselves as barriers to opportunity and participation for Israel's Arab women. Some of the major barriers include:

- **Educational Attainment:** Despite significant progress over the past few years, insufficient educational infrastructure and investments, are leading to consistently low achievement and performance. The relative weakness of the Arab public education system, and relatively low participation of Arab students in higher education (despite increases in recent years, especially among Arab women) are some of the most significant barriers to meaningful employment and appear repeatedly in all research and data. Importantly, according to a 2018 research by the Taub Institute, Arab girls perform much better at average than Arab boys in all high school matriculation results and are over-represented in STEM and excelling programs. However, this performance does not translate into continued study in these fields in higher education.
- **Language:** Inadequate levels of proficiency in Hebrew and English present a major barrier to the integration of Arab citizens in the general Israeli labor market. For most Arab citizens, Hebrew is the third language they will learn (after the spoken Arabic learned at home and the literary Arabic taught in school), and English is the fourth language. For many Arab women from more peripheral and/or traditional communities, Hebrew proficiency is a problem regarding both higher education and employment, and the fact that most Arabs and Jews in Israel study in separate school systems, live in separate communities and increasingly watch different media outlets exacerbates this problem. English language skills especially, which are a prerequisite for high-end, modern market, high-salary and managerial positions, present a significant barrier for most Arab citizens.
- **Lack of industrial and commercial zones near Arab towns:** Arab towns have few proximate industrial and commercial zones, meaning fewer employment and enterprise opportunities than in Jewish localities. For example, in Israel's northern region, 51% of the population is Arab, but only 18% of the industrial areas in that region are under the jurisdiction of Arab localities. This lack of nearby employment opportunities is especially limiting for Arab women, who often still need to find work in or near Arab localities due to the need to take care of their children in the afternoons and to respect cultural

expectations in some of the more traditional communities. Lack of industrial zones also means less municipal income and thus fewer municipal resources and services.

- **Public transportation:** despite significant governmental efforts to enhance public transportation in Arab localities, many Arab localities are still only partially or poorly connected to the public transportation system. With higher poverty levels among Arab families precluding two cars per family and with few higher education and employment opportunities available locally, it is often necessary for Arab women to commute outside their communities in order to study and work. The absence of adequate public transportation makes even relatively proximate academic and employment centers like Haifa or Beer Sheva, major cities that are only 30-40 miles away for many Arab localities, all but inaccessible.
- **Shortage of early childhood programs and support for mothers:** There is a notable shortage of state-recognized and subsidized early childhood frameworks in Arab communities across the country. According to Ministry of economy data from 2016 (latest available data), the rate of Arab children attending early childhood frameworks is around half of the rate of Jewish children. This shortage is detrimental both for Arab children and for working mothers.
- **Insufficient enforcement of labor laws:** The insufficient enforcement of labor laws in Israel presents a major challenge especially in relation to the employment of Arab women, who are more likely to be employed inside their own communities and/or in unskilled, part-time and seasonal jobs. Arab women therefore often earn well below minimum wages, in harmful employment that does not provide their social and occupational rights.
- **Traditional role of women:** Traditional Arab society emphasized the role of women in the home as caretakers of large families and the community. Over the last couple of decades there is growing acceptance of women's employment and educational attainment, though women still face resistance, especially in more traditional communities, where women may still be expected to return home early while studying or working, or even to remain inside Arab society for their schooling and employment (e.g. leading to many Arab women graduating high school in STEM tracks but then going to study a teaching degree, where there is an excess of unemployed Arab teachers).

Recent government budgets and measures:

Closing socio-economic gaps between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority has been defined by the Israeli government over the last few years as a national priority. Within that, the government has identified several spheres in which significant gaps are harming Israel's national economy, and where more proportional government investment could lead to enhanced development of Arab localities and more equal opportunities to Arab citizens. Enhancing the integration of Arab women into Israel's advanced labor market [has been defined as a specific target](#), due to the significant socio-economic gaps between Jewish and Arab women in Israel. Some examples of these gaps and of recent trends include:

On December 30th, 2015, the Government of Israel approved [Resolution No. 922, known as the "Economic Development Plan for the Arab Sector"](#), the largest and most comprehensive five-year plan ever advanced to close gaps for Israel's Arab society. It calls for allocations of NIS 10-15 billion to simultaneously address numerous barriers to economic development for Arab society (as detailed above). One of the specific priorities of this plan is to enhance the integration of Arab women in higher education and in the workforce. As such, the plan invests in overcoming some of the barriers mentioned above, including, for example, an investment of 40% of all public transportation development budgets in enhancing public transportation in, between and around Arab localities; investing 30% of all budgets for new childcare facilities in Arab localities; subsidizing salaries of Arab women hired in high tech companies; promoting training and establishment of small and micro-businesses owned by women through governmental loans; establishing and operating 21 "One Stop" Employment Centers in Arab localities, where 70% of the participants are Arab women; enhancing language skills and academic preparations (for Arab high school students and graduates); providing over 800 first degree scholarships annually to Arab students from weak socio-economic backgrounds etc.

Shared society between Arab and Jewish women:

Unprecedented investment into closing economic gaps between Jewish and Arab citizens—and women especially—stands to bring more Jews and Arabs into close contact and shared environments as economic integration progresses. There are many civil society leaders who believe that these efforts should be accompanied by initiatives addressing the social and cultural changes that are either inevitable as a result of increased contact and integration, or part of creating a more shared society overall.

Shared society initiatives seek to build these capacities through identifying common interests, often around gaps and issues affecting both communities. Among Jewish and Arab women, these can be empowering weak communities, enforcing rights, addressing the changing roles of women in society, enhancing women's security, and promoting shared society itself. Most shared society work today is spearheaded by non-governmental Jewish, Arab or Jewish-Arab organizations and is philanthropically supported. A few initiatives are recognized by the government or may be in partnership with government ministries—in particular around education.

Below are a few examples of projects from different spheres that are promoted by civil society organization to bring Jewish and Arab women and girls together:

1. [Mahapach-Taghir](#) - Mahapach-Taghir is a Jewish-Arab, feminist, non-profit grassroots organization for social change established in 1998. The vision of Mahapach-Taghir is a just Israeli society with equal socio-economic and educational opportunities for all sectors and a strong democratic civil society. Mahapach-Taghir's main goal is to minimize educational gaps for all of Israel's residents regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, or socio-economic status - and to build local democratic leadership within marginalized communities. To reach its goals, Mahapach-Taghir promotes inclusive dialogue, cooperation and solidarity amongst diverse communities and sectors whose common experiences with discrimination unites them. Mahapach-Taghir operates in eight marginalized communities in Israel from north to south: Kiryat Shmona, Sderot, Kiryat Yovel

(Jerusalem), Florentine (Tel Aviv); and the Arab communities Tamra, Tira, Yaffat elNassera, and Mghar.

2. [Itach-Maaki – Women Layers for Social Justice](#) - is an Israeli advocacy organization working to create a society in which the needs of disenfranchised Arab and Jewish women are addressed and the voices of these women are heard in public/policy discourse. Via legal aid, policy change, leadership training for women and public advocacy, Itach-Maaki is advancing the rights of women from marginalized groups nationwide - Arab women – including Bedouin women, single mothers, low-income working women, women dependent on public assistance, immigrants and others. Simultaneously, this multicultural group of women lawyers and activists is working toward a society in which women’s solidarity and identification with a shared vision for justice can overcome the ethnic/national fragmentation that is so problematic in Israel. Staff, board members and activists involved in Itach-Maaki are part of a unique Jewish-Arab organization, which utilizes ethnic, gender, socio-economic and legal perspectives on all issues it tackles, from the battle against poverty to leadership training for social change to promoting women's roles in national decision-making. In the complex society in which we live, Itach-Maaki is a unique microcosm of a better society, one in which Arab and Jewish women from diverse population groups and diverse social strata succeed in working together, supporting one another, tackling challenges, and marching forward toward justice and rights for women and all residents of Israel.
3. [Cross-integration of teachers](#): These programs place Jewish teachers in Arab schools and Arab teachers in Jewish schools to teach their native language. Program implementers strive to expose not only students, but also school at large to the integrated member of the other culture, including fellow teachers and administrators. Following the success of teacher integration through language programs, the Merchavim Institute initiated a cross-integration program for Arab teachers of math, science, and English as well as Arabic, which was adopted by the MOE in 2013 as the '[500 teacher integration program](#)'. As most of the teaching staff in Israel are women, and as around 40% of Arab women study various fields related to education, this program is especially pertinent to Arab women, and in addition to enhancing employment also enhances cross cultural encounters and a multi-cultural school staff of Jewish and Arab women. Three major organizations promoting this work are Merhavim, The Abraham Fund Initiatives and Givat Haviva.
4. [Na'am – Arab Women in the center](#) – an Arab led organization that works in the mixed cities of Lod, Ramleh and Jaffa, to address one of the most harmful phenomena – that of the murder of Arab women. Arab women have made up 38% of the of the 104 Israeli women reported murdered since 2011--well above the 21% that Arab citizens' make up of the entire population. Most of Arab women murders remain unsolved. The work of Na'am (a word that means "Yes" in Arabic) often brings Jewish and Arab activists together to protest this phenomenon.
5. [Sindyanna of Galilee](#) - Sindyanna of Galilee is an Arab-Jewish women-led company that operates in the Arab population of northern Israel. The organization uses locally sourced

- materials to produce fair trade organic and regular olive oil, za'atar spice mixes, carob syrup, almonds, honey, and olive oil soaps. These products are exported to the USA, Europe, Japan and Australia. Sindyanna combines commercial activity with work in the community, thereby empowering Arab women and bringing Jewish and Arab women together for joint activities while developing the olive industry. Sindyanna is led by Arab and Jewish women who are passionate about creating the best quality Fair Trade products, developing job opportunities for Arab women, and promoting coexistence.
6. [Jasmine: Promoting Businesses Owned by Jewish and Arab Women](#) - Jasmine works to expand economic, professional and personal opportunities for all Israeli women—from all population sectors and ethnic, financial and religious backgrounds—in order to enable women in Israel to participate to the fullest extent possible in the Israeli economy. In doing so, Jasmine elevates the status of Israeli women, advances Israel's economy and strengthens Israeli society as a whole. Jasmine's programs assist the Israeli Arab sector through two different complimentary paths. In one path, Jasmine implements and designs programs that are specifically for Israeli Arab women, reflecting their unique needs and challenges in seeking and excelling in their employment, and in business ownership. These programs include a computer and technology program that trains women in the field to be mentors and business leaders, and other training programs. Jasmine's programs recognize the shared challenge faced by all Israeli women, including Arab, Haredi, and secular women. These programs create opportunities for economic and cross-community partnership, and foster co-existence, often times specifically taking place in mixed Jewish-Arab cities for this purpose. They include a micro-loan program for low-income peripheral communities; job training programs for economically marginalized women; an annual conference for all Israeli businesswomen; a trilingual portal that hosts women-owned business websites and online shops for free; and various training and mentorship programs for women seeking gainful employment, small-business owners and women business leaders.
 7. [The Arab Jewish center for Equality, Empowerment and Cooperation \(AJEEC\) Gap year program](#): The mission of the Arab-Jewish Gap Year is to build genuine partnership between recent Arab and Jewish high school graduates, with the vast majority of participants being women. During the year-long program, participants attend workshops and seminars that create their own vision space shared between the two communities. After graduating from the program, participants become community ambassadors, encouraging discourse and action among their circles of friends and acquaintances and advancing a vision of shared society. Program graduates also are invited to join the Alumni Community currently being set-up.
 8. [Women Wage Peace \(WWP\)](#) is a grassroots nonpartisan movement made up of Israeli—Jewish and Arab—and Palestinian women, executed the largest women's peace march in Israel's history this October and is now maintaining a vigil for the duration of the Knesset's winter session. The movement, founded following the war between Israel and Gaza in the summer of 2014, aims to place "[the option of a political resolution at the top of the public agenda](#)" and has resolved that "whether left or right-wing, religious or secular, Arab or Jewish, we want to live in a society characterized by normality, prosperity and human

rights. All of us wish to lead a sane and balanced existence." The movement promotes numerous protest activities, public campaigns and educational initiatives, including an annual "[March of Hope](#)" that brings together thousands of women and men.

9. [SHIN's Young Women's Parliament](#): SHIN is a veteran organization working to empower Jewish and Arab women around Israel. The activity of the YWP is focused at educating and encouraging young girls to become involved, in the near future, in the struggle for gender equality and especially for women's equal participation in leading society. The project brings together Jewish and Arab high-school girls from various places around the country for joint activities. Activities focus on issues such as constructing a bridge over divergent backgrounds, sharing gender issues, raising awareness among young women by expanding the circles of women involved in feminist thinking and activism in Israel, inspiring critical thinking of young women and encouraging young women's leadership.